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SUBJECT: REBELLIOUS GOVERNOR OF MURMANSK OBLAST REPLACED

REF: ST. PETERSBURG 28

¶1. (SBU) Summary: President Medvedev has relieved Murmansk Oblast Governor Yuriy Yevdokimov of his position and replaced him with Deputy Head of the State Fishing Committee Dmitriy Dmitriyenko. Medvedev's decision followed United Russia's recent election defeat in the city of Murmansk where the incumbent lost to the candidate supported by Yevdokimov. Unlike Yevdokimov, Dmitriyenko does not have deep roots in Murmansk Oblast, and will likely govern in more complete compliance with the Kremlin's regional plans. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU). On March 21, President Dmitriy Medvedev accepted Murmansk Oblast Governor Yuriy Yevdokimov's resignation letter. Rumors of Yevdokimov's likely resignation first emerged at the end of February during the mayoral election campaign in the city of Murmansk, where Yevdokimov's ally Sergey Subbotin was running against incumbent Mikhail Savchenko (reftel). Yevdokimov, though a United Russia party member himself, accused United Russia of illegal and unfair campaigning, while his opponents retaliated by charging the governor with political intrigue against the incumbent mayor. The conflict between the governor and the incumbent mayor made the Murmansk mayoral elections highly competitive, and the first round on March 1 was inconclusive and necessitated a runoff. Subbotin defeated Savchenko in the March 15 runoff election by a decisive margin. Subbotin, who has always insisted that he was an active supporter of United Russia and Vladimir Putin's personal follower, has promised to formally enter the party. United Russia is reportedly weighing whether it should live with Subbotin's victory and accept him into its ranks, or whether it should initiate legal proceedings to cancel the election results. However, regardless of United Russia's decision on Subbotin, observers expected that the party would punish Yevdokimov to send a message to other governors that they should not work against United Russia's official election candidates.

¶3. (SBU). While Yevdokimov's resignation formally was voluntary, most observers are sure the Kremlin was behind it, and believe the election conflict with United Russia was just the straw that broke the camel's back with respect to Yevdokimov's relationship with United Russia. It was not the only charge against Yevdokimov. President Medvedev earlier had publicly criticized the governor for his failure to implement an anti-crisis regional employment program. Regardless, Yevdokimov himself now says that it is time to replace elder regional leaders with younger officials, and that he would help Dmitriyenko become acquainted with the oblast. Unlike Yevdokimov, who was first elected governor in 1996, Dmitriyenko is little known in the region. He has played up his prior service in the Northern Fleet, as well as his recent duties with the State Fishing Committee as being experiences which help him to understand the oblast and its economy.

¶4. (SBU) Comment. Replacement of Murmansk Governor Yevdokimov with a relative unknown is fully in line with the Kremlin's gubernatorial appointment strategy. Dmitriyenko was probably selected because he is an experienced and disciplined official who has certain knowledge and competence which will be useful for his new gubernatorial duties. However, he also does not have any deep roots in the region nor any personal business ties with the local political elite - making him completely dependent on Moscow. End Comment.

GWALTNEY